

RETURNING TO DACHAU

The Living and the Dead

BRUNO BETTELHEIM

OFF and on for close to twenty years, and beginning long before my own experience made them a very personal and immediate issue, the problems posed by totalitarian society have occupied my mind. A year (1938-39) in the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald made me realize what a central role the concentration camp (or prison) plays as an instrument of control under totalitarianism, and how essential it is in shaping the individual's personality into the type such a society requires. At first, therefore, it was the psychology and the sociology of the concentration camp that interested me most.

The result was a monograph published during the war, when information about the camps was still meager, which was met with skepticism in many places. In it, I described the ways in which the integrity of the human being was undermined by the camp regimen and his personality radically

changed. But a more important study remained to be written, one that would deal with the problem of reviving, restoring, and reintegrating the personality that had undergone the experience of the concentration camp. And this, the rehabilitation of traumatized or "destroyed" individuals, has been my vocation for many years.

AMONG the reasons I accepted a recent invitation to spend several months at the University of Frankfurt was the knowledge that I would be working with a group of sociologists who might help me to understand this process of rehabilitation. Originally, my plan of research was simple: I would interview Germans who had been in concentration camps in order to try and fathom the ways in which they had dealt with their experience. But a few weeks of careful observation made me realize that I had seen my problem much too simply.

Although I myself had already said in print that the personality of no one who had passed through a concentration camp could be immune to the effect of its institutions, I had not realized how utterly true this was. After a few weeks of talking to people in all walks of German life, and observing the present-day forms of that life—whether in universities, on the street, or at places of work—the conclusion became inescapable that every German had in some way or other been an inmate of that wider concentration camp which was the Third Reich. Every German who lived under the Nazi regime, whether he accepted or fought it, had been through a concentration camp in a sense; some, the actual inmates, had gone through it as tortured slaves, others—the majority of Germans—had gone through it as trustees, so to speak.

THE visit to Dachau that BRUNO BETTELHEIM describes here was his second. A Viennese by birth and education, Dr. Bettelheim was arrested by the Nazis after the Anschluss and spent a year in Buchenwald and Dachau. Later, in the United States, he produced a famous essay, "Behavior in Extreme Situations," which was a pioneer study in the effects of totalitarian terror on the personality. More recently, Dr. Bettelheim has devoted himself to treating emotionally disturbed children, and last year published a volume, *Truants from Life* (The Free Press), on the subject. Among other books by him are *Love Is Not Enough* (1950) and *Symbolic Wounds* (1954). Head of the University of Chicago's Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School, Dr. Bettelheim is also professor of educational psychology in the departments of education and psychology of the same university. Readers will remember his essay, "How Arm Our Children Against Anti-Semitism?" in our September 1951 issue.

Down at bottom the German had had only two positions open to him under Hitler: to preserve his inner integrity by fighting all aspects of the Nazi state—which a small minority did—or to accept it to a large degree and shape his personality in accordance with its demands—which was what the vast majority did. This difference between minority and majority still exists in Adenauer's Germany, and in all probability in the East Zone too. There are those who cannot yet extricate themselves from their struggle against the concentration-camp society, and those who cannot yet extricate themselves from having assented or been resigned to it.

Psychologically speaking, one might say that both groups were severely traumatized. But since the nature of the traumas was antithetical, they have reacted differently. Those who more or less accepted the concentration-camp society deny the nature of the camps and their horrors; in their case it is obvious that real amnesia has set in. When broken through, such amnesia tries to re-establish itself by frantic denials, by alibi-ing and by reaction formations (complaints about what the Americans and Russians did to Germans, what Americans still do to Negroes, and so on); a whole repertory of defensive mechanisms are set in motion when the amnesia that is still needed by the individual in order to continue functioning is attacked from the outside.

But those who fought the Nazi regime are hardly any more able to go on living in tranquillity. They do not deny, or block out by amnesia, the fact of the concentration-camp society; on the contrary, they seem to go on reliving that trauma in an "unintegrated" way. I met a man who wanted, most devotedly, to build a better Germany; he was not an isolated individual but an active leader of German intellectual life. After a while our conversation turned to the concentration camps, whereupon he took a two-year-old newspaper clipping out of his wallet and showed it to me. It reported that a visitor to Dachau had been told by his German guide that none but criminals were

confined in the camps, that torture was never practiced in them, and that what most people said about them was all lies—no decent citizen had ever been sent to a concentration camp.

At the time, I did not know whether to place any belief in this report or not. But what struck me was that this man had carried the clipping in his breast-pocket for two years—over his heart, as it were—which suggested that he, too, was unable to forget the concentration camps, not for a moment. . . .

I HAD toyed with the idea of revisiting Dachau, which I had been told was being preserved as a kind of memorial. The clipping and the dramatic way it had been brought to my attention increased my desire to do so. I had spent the spring and summer of 1938 in Dachau before being transferred to Buchenwald. In a way, I wanted to have the guide who would take me around deny the horrors of the camp; this would confirm me in my conviction that today's Germans prefer to deny wholly what Nazism had been like. But reality, as so often happens, turned out to be entirely different.

On my way to Dachau I stayed at one of the best hotels in Munich, registering as an American citizen and deliberately speaking nothing but English. When I asked how to make arrangements to visit the site of the concentration camp at Dachau, the desk clerk, who until then had been most polite and helpful, suddenly busied himself with another guest. Pressed, he told me that he didn't know if one could visit Dachau or how, and that there was nothing of interest left there anyway. I insisted nevertheless, and again he turned away from me, with the indication this time that I was showing very bad taste. After waiting a while, I turned to another desk clerk with the same question and got more or less the same response.

Finally, in the face of my persistence, they said they didn't know how the camp could be reached, since it was quite far from the train station, and hiring a car and driving there from Munich would be very expen-

sive. I answered that I would take the train and try to get a ride from Dachau station. This, they said, might be possible, but they were not at all sure I would be able to get a taxi there. I said I was willing to risk it. Was it not a memorable, though sinister, place that might be interesting to see? Icy silence. Then I asked for the train schedule, and was told that trains ran often to Dachau. What was the next one? I was shown a huge timetable giving all the trains leaving Munich in all directions. It was fastened to the desk facing the clerks, so I had to scan it upside down.

Until then I had not felt very strongly about visiting Dachau, but these hotel clerks gradually awoke a cold anger in me, first at their implicit denial of the importance of the camp, and then at the attitude of disapproval they manifested to one who seemed interested in it. So once aboard the suburban train from Munich to Dachau, I felt in more of a mood to relive the feelings I had known while in the camp itself. The easy, comfortable half-hour's ride reminded me of the trip of seventeen years before, with all its brutality involving the murder of good friends and the maiming of others. By the time I walked out of sleepy Dachau station to one of the several waiting taxis I was ready for an emotional experience.

I had planned the trip in the spirit of the newspaper clipping that partly motivated it. I had decided now to be a skeptical Austrian. In my best Viennese dialect I asked the taxi driver how far it was to the camp, whether there was anything to see there, and how much time it would take to visit it. The friendliness, the eagerness to do business with a sightseer, with which he encouraged me to visit the place and offered to point out all the interesting sights—claiming to be thoroughly familiar with them—was disarming. I mentioned casually that I had heard a lot of contradictory stories and, having some time on my hands, had felt the impulse to find out the truth. I added that people tended to exaggerate and dramatize things, whereupon he told me it was hardly possible to exaggerate Dachau's horrors.

He began to tell me about incidents some of which, curiously enough, I had witnessed myself. He spoke of the petty difficulties he had had with the SS men guarding the camp, and of the greater difficulties with them that peasants in the neighborhood had had. He described to me the killing of prisoners in '38 and the incredibly callous attitude of the SS men involved—exactly what I myself had witnessed so many times. I was just beginning to wonder how it was that this man could accept the truth about the concentration camps with so much equanimity when he gave me the answer, or the clue to it. Suddenly he left his tale of Dachau to reminisce about his four years in a prisoner-of-war camp in Siberia; how he had lived in fear of his life between the Russian guards and the cold, dirt, and hunger. It was as if a story about one prison camp naturally led to one about another.

HERE, then, was my answer. This German had suffered under Hitler—so he felt—just as much as those in Hitler's concentration camps had. So he felt free of guilt. As a resident of the village of Dachau, he had not only known of the existence of the camp, but had feared its presence—this, more than most other Germans. True, he had been happy about German military successes as long as they continued, and he commended the greater equality in the distribution of earthly goods (particularly food) under the Nazis as compared with the years immediately after 1945 when some had plenty while he had starved. Nonetheless, he was full of hatred for Hitler; it was, however, mainly for very personal reasons.

Before the war the SS men from Dachau camp had filled the taverns in town and monopolized the free girls. Even worse, they had interfered with one of the great pleasures of his youth, which was to sit in the tavern with his friends and sound off about everything that displeased him in life. The constant presence of the SS men had prevented them from talking to each other as they wanted to. The cab driver became even more heated when describing

to me how that scoundrel, Hitler, by locating the camp outside this nice home town of his, had given it a bad name in the world—so much of one that whenever he went elsewhere he preferred not to say where he lived, since that invariably led to an unpleasant discussion.

If anything could be learned from this little incident, it was that a man like this one, who had had first-hand experience of the proximity of Dachau, could never be made to view it in a favorable light. Nor, unlike most other Germans today, could he put it out of his mind, living as he still did near its site. It had not been a unique experience, a nightmare that could be pushed out of memory; for him it was a reality with which he had had to learn to live over the years. Although Dachau camp had not originally turned him against the Nazi regime, which had, he felt, done a great deal of good for people like himself, he could never accept the camp itself. At the same time, since this same regime had brought him suffering that he could liken to that of the prisoners at Dachau, he did not need to feel guilty or to deny anything. In his own simple way, he had worked through the reality of Dachau and what it stood for, and his attitude was therefore a matter-of-fact one. His constant contact with the fact of the camp, so that its horror had impressed itself on him slowly, not suddenly, deprived it of the nightmarish qualities of a trauma that overshadowed all of life or needed to be denied.

As he showed me around the place I felt quite comfortable in my role of naive visitor. He pointed out what he could, getting excited about nothing, but neither omitting nor hiding anything he might have been expected to know.

He told me about the tower over the camp's entrance gate. He pointed it out from a distance, regretting the fact that we could not get closer because it was, as I could see, now part of an American army installation, and in a restricted area. Had I addressed myself to the commanding officer, I could

probably have got permission to go inside, but it seemed pointless. I was not trying to revisit sites, or view buildings; I wanted to receive impressions. And the fact that the dreadful tower was now part of an American army installation removed all its dread. What we prisoners had not dared hope for, and had hardly dared to dream—that the Stars and Stripes would fly over the tower—had become an everyday reality. This being so, what use was there in looking at a collection of stones close up?

We drove along outside the stockade, the live-wire fence, the watch-towers, the ditch that used to be filled with water. But the logs of the once formidable stockade were weathered, rotting, and askew; the cruel wire was torn and dangling; the bottom of the ditch was dry, its steep sides slowly caving in and overgrown with grass, weeds, and wildflowers. It was the same place, and yet it was not. Only by a deliberate act of memory could I re-create the past, which at every step was belied by the appearance of the towers, the stockade walls, and the grass-covered moat, all looking like ancient ruins—and by the presence of American soldiers and arms.

We drove through what had once been the main street of the camp, which was lined with a double row of barracks. Slowly, we approached the one in which I had lived. For a moment I was tempted to ask the driver to stop and let me out, but children were playing in front of it, and I thought better than to disturb their play and privacy for the sake of what by now was empty curiosity.

The camp now houses refugees from the East Zone, and they have tried to pretty up the place. The windows—through which rotating floodlights had glared all night into the eyes of prisoners, men trying to catch a moment of sleep or rest against the next day's torture and threat of death—these same windows were now softened by curtains, by the effort of women to make homes behind them. It was just like any other DP camp, dreary in the main, but at least its inmates had some hope of getting out.

This was not Dachau. It was as if the concentration camp had never existed. It was neither a monument by which to remember a terrible past, nor one that could promise a better future. It simply represented the practical utilization of available facilities, just as the American troops, for utilitarian reasons, are now making use of the excellent facilities the prisoners once built under the whip for the use of SS troops.

I do not believe this erasing of the past was deliberate. The military occupation, and indeed the whole postwar history of Germany, lend themselves exceedingly well to the obliteration of the Nazi past—or rather the deepest wishes of the Germans themselves combine with history to do just that. In those surroundings and at that moment, it seemed as if only the cab driver and I remembered the past—if for very different reasons and with different, or again maybe not so different, feelings.

WHAT about the memorial? We drove into a conspicuously marked-off enclosure, where two American soldiers on guard waved us on in friendly fashion. There was a small space in which three cars were parked, clearly marked by their license plates as belonging to the American occupation forces. The omnipresence of U.S. army symbols, while most reassuring, in a way took the edge off one's experience of the spirit of the place—or at least it did that for me. The clerks at the hotel in Munich and their reaction to my inquiries had reawakened my old anger; the displaced persons living in the camp and the presence of the American military had made it die down again. It was no use beating a dead dog, even though when alive it had mauled, maimed, and killed.

The memorial covered only a small area, and included the old place of execution, the gallows, the gas chamber, the crematorium, and two or three (my cab driver was not quite sure) places of mass burial. In the center of all this stood the statue of a concentration-camp prisoner in typical uniform, his face and figure showing the ravages

of physical and mental suffering. It was true to life, yet at the same time idealized. Not a great piece of art, but decent and well meant. Perhaps we are still too close to what happened in the camps to express it more symbolically, and hence in a way that would be more aesthetically valid.

In this pleasant grove, interspersed with well-kept flower beds, only the statue of the prisoner and my own conscious effort brought to mind what the memorial was there to commemorate. Of course, I saw signs explaining what each place of horror had been used for. Maybe what oppressed me was the smallness of it all. It was hard to imagine, looking at the neatness of everything, that tens of thousands of people had over many years suffered incredible degradation and pain here. True, in a way the orderliness and dispatch with which bureaucratic transactions in human lives were once effected here had been one of the supreme horrors of the place. But this, too, no longer came through from the present neatness and orderliness. The little box that had been the death chamber could not have held very many prisoners at once. There were only two openings, each admitting but a single corpse at a time to the oven of the crematorium. The two burial places, one marked with a wooden cross, the other with a Jewish star—pits into which the ashes of thousands of human beings had been dumped—were each not much larger than an individual grave.

The wilted wreaths, with their faded inscriptions, added to the illusion that everything belonged to a remote past. The walls of the death chamber and the crematorium, covered with the penciled names and remarks of visitors—all so typical of the historical monument—not even these emblems of the tourist aroused more than a mild disgust in me. After all, most of the visitors had been Jewish and American. Why be angry at those who had defaced the walls of the memorial if they were in deep sympathy with those who had suffered here? That they inscribed their names and the dates of their visits meant only that they, too, felt they had been in a historic place, and one that

had so little connection with their immediate lives that, far from being over-awed by the spirit of it, they had tried to establish some connection with it by leaving signs of their presence on its walls. Some inscriptions included angry remarks, but they, too, seemed out of place if not childish, because of the abyss between what they were meant to express and what they actually said.

If my experience in the camp had been a single event, I could perhaps have recaptured the old feeling of the place. But what made Dachau memorable to me were innumerable experiences: the day hundreds of my comrades suddenly went blind, the shooting of a friend, the suicide of another, who deliberately ran into charged wire; and, most of all, the constant, continuous petty suffering and degradation, and—perhaps even more deeply felt—the way one tried to maintain oneself in the face of them.

A SMALL group was going around at the same time as we: an American major, a captain, and two or three ladies with them; probably they had come in the cars I saw in the parking lot. The major looked grim and angry as he inspected the gas chamber and the crematorium, but the others seemed indifferent, even slightly bored, if I read their faces aright. To top it all, a teacher was leading a group of German children through the place, boys and girls of about ten or eleven, some twenty-five in all. I suppose they were from one of the local schools, since I saw no vehicle they might have come in. They seemed neither interested nor impressed. The teacher told them something about the number of those who had died here. The children joked, hardly glancing at the small building or the inscriptions. My impression was that they were enjoying their escape from the classroom, but that the place itself meant nothing to them, despite the teacher's objective explanations—which amounted to no more than a flat recital of facts. He, too, seemed uninterested, and after a quick tour left with his charges.

I do not know how others feel when some-

thing once part of their lives becomes a monument to be visited by sightseers. For myself it was not the right way to re-experience the past. Perhaps it is difficult to glorify human suffering outside the frame of a religion that vindicates and gives it meaning. I have avoided mass graves all my life because they have no meaning for me. The tomb of the Unknown Soldier, yes; the mass tomb at Verdun, no. Standing there in Dachau, the concentration camp was more over and done with for me than when I had thought of it in faraway Chicago. Maybe the importance of a historical event depends on numbers, or on the grandeur of suffering or that of achievement. But the significance of the sheer human fate is individual. I felt stronger emotion, a few days later, when relatives in Vienna pointed out where, to escape the Gestapo, this person had jumped from a window and another had hanged himself. These were single human fates and there was a great sense of immediacy in their loss. The mass commemoration of the tens of thousands of victims at Dachau gave to their deaths, as to their lives, the remoteness of a chronicle. . . .

Driving back to the station, the driver unburdened his heart, and thereby reduced Dachau once more to the human experience it was for him. Why had the camp had to be located at Dachau, why not somewhere else? Why had it had to be in his home town? It was all because of an old farmer and his good-for-nothing sons, who did not know how to till the soil. The site of the camp had once been a large farm; then it was sold to the government, which before the First World War had built a munitions or arms factory on it, he was not clear which. When the Nazis came to power, they used it for a concentration camp because it already had barracks on it, and a stockade and barbed-wire fence. Here, too, it had been a matter of sheer, utilitarian convenience, as with the American authorities now using part of the camp, and the Bonn government using the remainder to quarter DP's.

Actually, the presence of these refugees commemorates far better than does the mon-

ument the sufferings of human beings at the hands of their fellows. The extreme misery of Dachau belongs to the past, but misery in general survives: people are still being driven from their homes by fear and terror. The victims of the moment were German but I did not find any historical justice in that fact. If one believes, as I do, that our first concern must be for the living, it becomes understandable that for the Germans, too, the horrors of the concentration camp regime fade before the misery of the DP's who have taken it over.

Leaving Dachau, we again passed the barracks, and then came my last view of the camp and of its awful gate, through which some jeeps were now rolling. A large American army installation, a large DP camp, and a few small buildings as a memorial to the past—I could not quite accept it, but maybe it corresponded to reality, since the past must bow to the needs of the present. History (and the crematorium) had been relegated to a small area located, as if symbolically, at the farthest corner of the camp, away from the business of the present.

For my own reasons, I wished they had preserved the camp just as it was when liberated. Then I would probably have been able to recapture my memories better; then Dachau, as it had been, might have come to life on the tide of old feelings of anger, degradation, and despair. Waiting at the train station, I listened to German DP's who sipped beer and talked of how they had lost everything. On the ride back to Munich, I looked out of the train window over bombed-out areas. And then I realized that the present state of Dachau was more in keeping with reality, present-day reality, than if it had been preserved as it was at its liberation—as, I am told, Buchenwald is. Preserving a site intact removes it from the stream of history, makes it a monument that is no longer of this time and this place.

THIS, then, was what I learned from re-visiting Dachau: that I could best preserve it in my mind, and its other surviving inmates who, like myself, had left Germany

could do the same because our lives did not need to continue in and around Dachau, because we had radically separated ourselves from the country of which it had once been a central institution. This the Germans themselves could not do. Keeping Dachau unchanged would have meant that they were separating themselves as radically from their past as if they themselves had emigrated. I could keep the old Dachau intact as an emotional experience. I could digest its impact by working it out emotionally and psychologically, and it would remain the impact of a Dachau that preserved its old physical reality unchanged because I was no longer attached to the physical reality of Germany itself. For me, Dachau had become a problem of human nature and a personal experience, but it was not a particular place in the country that was my home. The Germans, however, if they wanted to go on living as more than mere survivors of Nazism and defeat, had to deal with the *place*, Dachau, as well as with Dachau, the *crime*. If they had preserved Dachau in its entirety as a monument to the shame of Nazism, and to the immense suffering it inflicted, it would follow that they should have preserved their ruined cities as a monument to the suffering they themselves had experienced. I realized, when I left the station at Munich and saw the utter destruction still around me, that unconsciously I had wanted the Germans to dedicate the old Dachau for all time as a monument to my sufferings and those of my fellow Jews and anti-fascists, but had not wanted them to dedicate any monuments to their own sufferings, which were almost equally a result of Nazism.

Of course, the inmates of Dachau had been helpless victims of the Hitler regime, whereas the Germans, or nearly half of them, had embraced it of their own free will. Might it not be, then, that I had hoped unconsciously for the dedication of an unchanged Dachau more as a monument to the vileness of the torturers who established and ran it than as a memorial to its victims?

So this was another lesson I learned: that one cannot dedicate monuments to the de-

pravity of a system by tending carefully the graves of its victims. After all, it is the Christian martyrs themselves who symbolized their faith and religious creed; it was not the cruelty of their torturers, which was only incidental, or seems so to us now, that really counted. I realized that I had gone to Dachau in the wrong spirit. Dachau, to me, was now a symbol more of the cruelty that took human beings and converted them into ciphers to be processed in a gas chamber than of suffering mankind. One simply cannot look at the statue of a concentration camp prisoner in stone or bronze when one has been a prisoner oneself; the survivor cannot look at the graves of his fellows in suffering and say: Behold the greatness of my suffering, and admire it! About one's own suffering, and that of others, one can do something only by living and acting.

The Germans have had to live more closely than I with the memory of their concentration camps. During the war and most of the time since then, they have lived with it every day. They cannot detach themselves from the suffering brought about by Nazism by crossing an ocean and entering upon a new way of life. Perhaps they did the right thing when they set aside only a small enclosure at Dachau to the memory of the victims, while using the largest part of the place for DP's, and letting the Americans use the rest of it for an army installation. "Letting," I write. As I saw some vehicles roll by with the license plates marked

"U. S. Forces in Germany" which one sees everywhere in West Germany, I wondered: suppose the unthinkable had happened, and the Japanese had overrun the United States, how would Americans have met, dealt with, and worked through ten years of life with the symbols all around them of utter defeat, and with the victors everywhere on their streets? Would they have made a memorial of anything that reminded them of their defeat? I do not know. But I do know that the only way to live with such a past is not to keep it alive unchanged, encapsulated, but to confine it to an ever smaller place, as had been done with the memorial at Dachau.

Sad as this is in view of my own experience and those of the friends and relatives of the millions murdered by the Nazis, we cannot expect present-day Germans to have a much different attitude toward their victims than they have toward their own devastated cities. Since they are much more matter-of-fact about the ruins of their own homes than I am, I must accept their being more matter-of-fact about Dachau. As if with a vengeance, present-day Germany is turning away from the destruction of the past toward the building of the present and the future. Yes, they do it with a will and a vengeance, as if they had a need to cover up, forget, and undo the past—including Dachau. So far only the frantic activity is obvious. Will it lead to a better future? This as yet is hard to say, but much will depend on their—and our—attitude to their past.